FOR THE CITY

ROCKFORD URBAN MINISTRY

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In the summer of 1995 two events happened in Chicago which define something of what modern American urban life has become and also something of the way the health and vitality of the churches is a matter of importance for our whole society, certainly our cities. And inspired me to try to write a book.

Everyone knew about the first event because it was reported widely in the press all around the country. On Thursday, July 13,

the temperature at O'Hare reached 106 degrees, the hottest day in Chicago since official records have been kept. Most of us stayed indoors as much as we could. From Lincoln Park to Lake Forest people prayed that the demands on the electrical supply to power hundreds of thousands of air conditioners would not exceed the utility's ability to generate. At Cabrini-Green people opened all the windows -- although at 106 an open window is not necessarily helpful -- slept on bare floors, or sat outside all night, waiting for a blessed breath of moving air.

On Friday, something new and unexpected and tragic started to happen. The elderly, the sick, the people who live alone, the ones who double and triple-lock windows and doors and who live in such fear of violent crime that they never open a window and venture outside only when absolutely necessary, began to die. Before the heat wave broke, more than 600 Chicagoans had died of heat-related causes and the city was stunned.

Who was to blame? City government? The welfare system? Some folks even tried to place responsibility on the victims themselves

for not understanding the threat the heat posed and asking for help from a neighbor. How could it be that more than 600 people died of the heat in what we like to think is the premier American City, "The City That Works", in the Year of our Lord, 1995?

And then it began to dawn on everybody simultaneously that the tragedy could occur, did occur, because something has happened to the notion of community, in the city, and perhaps throughout the land. Vulnerable, fragile, elderly people died because no one knew about their vulnerability and fragility. No one cared. No one much knew they existed in the first place.

We're still thinking about that: those of us who live in Chicago, but also people in other cities and communities and towns and villages where the sense of community, the everyday value of neighbors caring for one another, seems to be receding and disappearing.

The people who died of the heat had neither air conditioning nor community. And those of us who belong to churches, who live our

lives in some way as the church were reminded, tragically, that the vitality and health and very existence of churches is a matter of life and death for the city.

Churches, I submit, enhance and celebrate, and sometimes give life, literally, to the city simply by being communities in which people know and care about one another. During the worst of the heat, members of the Caring Connection at Fourth Church called one another to make sure all were safe. The Center For Older Adults initiated an emergency telephone contact system to locate and talk to those most at risk to share information about cooling centers or arrange transportation to the church offices and center. Nobody can document this, of course, but my hunch is that throughout the city the most effective response to the threat of the heat wave was the church, thousands of church members, and members of synagogues and mosques, calling one another, reaching out to one another in small acts of basic community that were life-saving. The summer of 1995 was a reminder that the presence and health of the church is a very important matter.

The second event in the hot summer of 1995 was a memorial service, conducted by an Associate Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church and attended by a handful of church staff and a few members and several social workers. The event was not covered by the media. Tom Rook told about it in a sermon this summer, but for the most part the event went unnoticed.

Mary Wojac was the person who had died, a 52-year old woman with no family who had spent most of the past ten years on the streets of Chicago. Mary was not exactly homeless. Through the efforts of devoted and determined social workers and the staff of our Social Service Center, she had a room. But Mary was, I was told, a chronic paranoid schizophrenic. She was sick -- but in the peculiar wisdom of our society currently not sick enough to be cared for publicly. Her episodes were frequent and severe. In her paranoia she could not, would not, be in an enclosed space. She would not return to her room and lost track of the fact that she had a room. All day long she sat on first one entry and then another, moving occasionally to the stone benches in front of the building on Michigan Avenue. Occasionally Kevin Olson, the

Director of our Social Service Center, could persuade her to return to her room or to come inside the church for something to eat, or to get warm, or cool. During her episodes Mary spent the night here, somewhere around the building, huddled for warmth and safety beneath its grey storm walls. Mary, even in the mysterious depth of her psychosis, knew us. When we moved a block away during renovation, she came along, continuing what was an anchoring and life-sustaining connection.

There was a sweet moment which occurred with some regularity. Our temporary quarters at 190 East Delaware were directly across the street from the Casino Club, an old and distinguished private club with an elegant canopy to protect its members from the elements as they come and go. It is a perfect place to be on a blustry or rainy day. Sometimes Mary, who had followed us, and who still would not come inside, spread her blanket on the doorstep of the Casino Club and lay down for an afternoon nap, or for the night. Sometimes members of the Club, arriving at cocktail hour, or lunch, or departing for the day, had to carefully step over Mary enjoying her nap. Never did they ask her to leave, so far as I

know and always, when I saw it, I smiled and thought maybe God was smiling at the gentle irony, but also because something of the essential nature of the church of God was being expressed.

When Mary died, of a heart condition exacerbated by her hard life, the church gathered to celebrate her life and to thank God for the gift of her life and to commend her to God's eternal care and to bear witness to a truth about the human community that occasionally gets lost in the city, namely that every person is a child of God, a valued part of God's creation, a brother or sister in God's family of humankind.

The church in the city is in a dilemma. In fact, some would say in a lot of trouble. The neighborhoods the churches used to anchor have changed, or have disappeared. The gorgeous old ethnic parish churches that line the Kennedy Expressway were built to serve thousands of immigrant Roman Catholics. Now they serve greatly-diminished congregations, but still must invest most of their energy, resources, and creativity maintaining their buildings. They are dramatic examples of a phenomenon that is widespread,

affecting all the denominations. We have a lot of aging buildings located in neighborhoods that no longer have in them the people who built the churches, or neighborhoods that have become very troubled, marginal, violent places. Being the church there is very different from what it was fifty years ago.

City churches are in a dilemma because of the larger dilemma of American cities. Barbara Brown Taylor, in an essay on the urban church, points out the irony that historically people came to cities for safety. Cities had walls to protect inhabitants from the threats of the wilderness, the countryside.

Something of a major swap has happened, obviously. Now people leave the city for their safety, the viability of the suburbs, the country. A major part of the pain of the city is the exodus of people and capital and jobs. There is a devastating pattern of abandonment in the city by business, seeking more favorable taxes, a safer environment, better schools for employees. And every time it happens it makes it that much more difficult for the city to maintain quality of life for its people. The economists know

it. They also know that major American cities serve as the welfare and education and public health care system for the whole nation with fewer private and public dollars to do the job. Changing that devastating dynamic is a matter of highest priority.

And as city life becomes tougher, rawer, with greater demands for social services and fewer dollars to provide items, urban people become more and more private, withdrawing spiritually and emotionally as well as physically.

Martin Marty is talking a lot about privatization these days and points to Robert Bellah's classic study of individualism in our culture, Habits of The Heart. One of the interviews in the book is with Sheila Larsen. When asked about her religious behavior, she said she doesn't go to church. Her faith, she told Bellah, is "Sheila-ism", not expressed in religious institutions at all but through "just my own little voice." [Ibid, P. 145.]

"Cocooning" is the word the market researchers have coined for it. "Looking for haven at home, drawing the shades, plumping the

pillows, clutching the remote -- a full-scale retreat into the last controllable environment -- your own digs."

What does it mean -- what can it mean -- to be the church in the city, in times such as these?

A lot of bright people are asking that question. An Urban Ministry Report produced by the Presbyterian Church (USA) recommends new approaches, new forms. The word I would add to the conversation is a basic word, and it comes from deep within our history and tradition. God's people have been taken from their city and transported to another city, to Babylon. Their city has been leveled and they are living far from home, their temple, their religion, their city. Understandably they are not happy to be where they are. They are not happy with their captors. They spend most of their time thinking about going home.

It is to them, the exiled community in Babylon, that a man by the name of Jeremiah writes a remarkable letter ...

> "Seek the welfare of the city" he tells them.
> "Pray to God on the city's behalf -- for in its
> welfare you will find your welfare."

That's a revolutionary idea, the Old Testament scholars tell us. It certainly inverts the mode of thinking which was typical then -- as

now -- namely that your welfare will be enhanced by getting away from the city, withdrawal from the city -- either physically or emotionally, by retreating into your own private spirituality.

God's people are to pray for the city and seek its welfare. Their own welfare is bound up in the city's. It is the task of the church -- not simply to be a refuge from the city, but to seek the city's welfare, to live deeply and intentionally in the city and for the city, to engage the life of the city creatively, energetically, to be open to the city -- in every way it can think of because its own welfare is at stake.

Peter Drucker is probably the most popular and widely-read philosopher of management working and writing today. One of his favorite subjects recently is what can profit-making enterprises and non-profits learn from each other. Drucker says that the most successful profit-making enterprises are those that do not focus primarily on making a profit but on something he refers to as corporate mission." [See H. Cox, Fire From Heaven, p. 236]

Isn't it ironic that at the very moment churches are desperately trying to figure out how to survive, trying everything they can think of to grow, sounding, that is to say, for all the world like struggling business enterprises in search of new markets, and new customers, business is learning that part of the secret of success is to forget about it and pay attention to mission.

I confess I was tempted to call this presentation "Peter Drucker and the Prophet Jeremiah"; they are both saying the same thing. To stay alive, vital, successful, says Drucker, you have to have a mission, you have to be convinced that your product is going to be useful to your customer.

"Seek the welfare of the city -- for in its welfare is your welfare", the prophet Jeremiah said. We are here -- for the city. All churches -- to the extent that they are alive and vital and viable -- know that they exist for the community around them.

Someone once described the mission of the modern urban church as “keeping alive the rumor that there is a God.” That is what the

church of the future must do and be—a living reminder of Jesus, God's incarnate son: a reminder to a busy, secular, preoccupied world, of the transcendent, the holy, the sacred in the midst of life.

Church buildings themselves, sometimes elegant, sometimes ordinary, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, are nevertheless reminders of the presence of God in the life of the world. In the bustling metropolis, the church is a "grace note," whose architecture, windows, quiet strength, stand as a reminder of a religious tradition that extends all the way back to the beginning of time. (**Rural Church—see Kathleen Norris)**

What transpires inside church buildings is counter-culture activity in the world of the future: activity with no market value and little entertainment potential. It is called worship—the intentional bringing of life into God's presence, the corporate offering of gratitude and praise to the Creator and giver of life, the communal listening for a word from the Lord and a renewal of commitment to live in the world as God's people.

> “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”[1]

A provisional exhibition/demonstration of the Kingdom of God. It has been about transformation from the beginning, the transformation of the individual self by the grace, forgiveness and love of Jesus Christ, and the transformation of the world into God’s intent, God’s kingdom, God’s commonwealth. At Mt. Sinai, the people of God were given ten laws which regulated their relationship with God and also the way they lived together in society, economically, politically, personally.

Biblical scholars help us understand that the uniqueness of the story of God and God’s people is precisely that it is about theology

[1] Book of Order, Presbyterian Church(USA), G-1.0200; Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church(USA) 1997

and sociology, a way of believing in God and a way of living with one's neighbors. Believing in God puts one into a new social contract. The weakest of the weak, orphans and widows—struggling to survive in a patriarchal culture—are to receive special attention. So is the alien, the stranger, the poor. In fact, to guarantee that economics will not determine the social contract as it does in every other nation, in Israel debt will not extend more than six years, and every fifty years, at the Jubilee, all accounts are declared paid in full and everybody returns to equal status. It is a remarkable arrangement and its purpose is to honor God's oneness and holiness and also the neighbor's dignity, _____and freedom. Walter Brueggemann observes that in this tradition, "You cannot say 'God' without saying 'neighbor,' nearly hyphenated
'God-neighbor.'"[2]

It is a defining moment when Jesus is asked "which commandment is first of all," and answers with two: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your

[2]Walter Brueggerman *The Covenanted Self, Explorations in Law and Covenant,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.79.

mind and with all your strength". The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[3]

It is both/and, not either/or; God and neighbor, theology and mission, personal transformation, evangelism and social action.

A generation after Jesus, an evangelist put it plainly and uncompromisingly:

> "Those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from here is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."[4]

So the church is called and commissioned by God to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and to show the good news in transformed relationship within and acts of love and justice in the world. The world is hungry for that kind of religious wholeness. There is

[3] Mark 12:29-31, New Revised Standard Version
[4] I John 4:20-21, New Revised Standard Version

plenty of evidence that modern men and women are not much interested in a religion that is entirely private and personal and has nothing to do with the world. There is also evidence that modern men and women are not much compelled by church social service or social activist programs which are not related clearly and openly to belief in God and faith in Jesus Christ. There is plenty of evidence that where both happens in the life of a church, the Gospel is communicated, Jesus Christ becomes real, and transformation, personal and social, begins to happen.

A tutoring program in a large metropolitan church serves five hundred children from a nearby public housing project plagued by violence, unemployment and poverty. The tutors are all volunteers, mostly young urban adults working in law firms, banks, brokerage and hospitals, mostly non-church members, many non-believers, or ex-believers. The tutors meet their young students once a week for an hour and a half in the church building. The church itself is growing. And in every monthly new members class there are always several young adults who make their witness:

“I was invited to be a tutor by a friend, signed up, worked with a student—in the church for six months. I began to care a lot about my student, and then one evening, I’m not sure why—maybe it was the music I heard from the choir rehearsal, or the picture of Jesus on the classroom wall, whatever—one evening I connected my being here tutoring a child with Jesus and what he said and stood for. So I started to attend on Sunday morning.”

It is a powerful moment when the ministers of that church administer the sacrament of baptism to several young adults, kneeling in front of the congregation, often with tears of gratitude and love in their eyes.

Religion that expresses its theology in mission will communicate much about itself. Churches that hold together their beliefs about God and their love for the world and their neighbor will be vital churches.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, has helped us understand the new situation in which the church finds itself as the 21st century begins. Hall describes the "End of Christendom," the centuries-old accommodation between the Christian church and its political host: Roman Empire, Great Britain, the United States of America. The church of the future will have to live in a secular environment which extends no special privilege to religion; or to one particular religion above others. Hall thinks the end of Christendom is a good thing because it presents the church with a new opportunity to be authentic and true to itself, an effective proclaimer of Good News and a vital expression of God's love and justice. People will come to church in the future, for instance, not because of social expectations, pressure, or even family tradition. All that is gone now. People will be in church because they want to be and because they are hungry for meaning, searching for community, seeking for some sense that their lives have meaning and significance.

The church has a new opportunity to make an authentic

witness in its worship, the quality of its community life and the passion of its mission in the world, a God-given opportunity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to become that good news.

The world is watching and seeking and waiting. And the church knows a secret which was given to it two thousand years ago. What the world wants and needs is none other than the one who said,

"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."[5]

Harvard theologian Diana Eck has written a new book, Encountering God, which uses her experience and expertise in the religions of India to reflect on Christian faith and practice. In a chapter on the Holy Spirit as the lively presence of God in life, she describes the Hindu Shakti shrines in India ... "lively, colorful, noisy, people crowding in, piles of red garlands; the shattered

[5] Mark 8: 34,35, New Revised Standard Version

coconuts slammed to the pavement as offerings; hundreds of hands reaching to touch her sacred flame. Shakti shrines are described by a Hindi word -- Jagarita -- which means "fully awake." Professor Eck writes:

> "When I think of the churches of Boston I would not call many of them Jagarita. We do not gravitate toward them after work. If we did we would find them locked up tightly. There is a sense of deep sleep that has settled on the churches, she says. There is no sense of the power and lively presence of God. [Encountering God, p. 138,139.]

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth -- the light of the world." He said it to his disciples and, I believe, he says it to us. We, here in the church -- or in whatever churches you belong to and invest and participate in -- we are salt of the earth, light of the world. We exist, we live, for the city. Our purpose, our mission is to live for the city, in the name of God to serve its needy; in the name of God

to create and nurture human community.

And, in the name of God, to proclaim, in our life together, the truth of Jesus Christ, that it is in living for others, corporately, but also personally, that we realize our own lives; that it is to the extent that you and I live for others that we become who God has created us to be, that it is to the degree that Jesus Christ lives in us, that we know our salvation.

"Seek the welfare of the city -- for in its welfare you will find your welfare" -- which is, after all, another way of saying the most important thing he ever said:

> "Those who want to save their life will lose it,
> and those who lose their life for my sake and
> for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of
> the city, will save it." (Mark 8:35)

Amen.